

# FRIENDS of the Giant Otter

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## Editorial

Many thanks to Raphael, Sandra, Paul, Juan Carlos, Victor, Miriam, Helen and Manu, who all contributed to making this the longest and most interesting issue yet! Clearly, giant otter research and conservation is very much alive, and it is highly encouraging to see the newsletter begin to fulfil its intended role as an effective networking tool. However, please let me know if its increasing size and complexity (that is, the photographs) is becoming a problem for some of you. Also, it would be great to receive news from the northern half of the continent for the next bulletin! Looking forward to hearing more from you,

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# PROJECT UPDATES & NEW INITIATIVES

## **PERU Using Protected Area Patrols to determine giant otter distribution**

The Frankfurt Zoological Society's (FZS) "Protected Area Support Programme" in Peru has started funding Special Patrols in selected Protected Areas (PA) of the country. Special Patrols are non-routine field trips used to identify and assess new threats to the integrity of the PA. For two weeks we accompanied the head of Manu National Park, Modesto Chalco, and his team, entering the National Park via the northeastern border, crossing by foot from the unprotected Camisea watershed to the headwaters of the Manu. Camisea is the location of one of South America's largest gas developments. The river is as yet pristine, but boat traffic has increased greatly, and the region's future regarding colonization by Andean settlers and resource use patterns by the local Machiguenga people is uncertain.

Although the main objectives are those stated above, Special Patrols, as well as routine patrols, are valuable opportunities to obtain giant otter distribution data, especially in very remote areas and countries where resources for research or monitoring are very limited. We located one giant otter campsite on the Camisea River, not freshly used. On the Manu Chico, the first large tributary of the Alto Manu, we were fortunate to find and film a group of 6 individuals. We followed the group one afternoon and the next morning, roughly 20 kilometres downriver. Four campsites were found and GPS'd along this stretch. One day further downriver we found and filmed the three-strong Piraña lake group which we had not encountered in the 2002 Manu Giant Otter Census.

**Frank Hajek & Jessica Groenendijk**  
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## **PERU Giant otter monitoring in the Tambopata National Reserve**

During 2002, I focused my fieldwork on the five largest oxbow lakes of the Tambopata area, all of which are within giant otter territories. Five giant otter groups were identified and regularly monitored, 21 throat markings out of the 24 animals observed were recorded. Using a GPS, the respective territories were mapped, including lakeshores, streams, trails for use by tourists or local people, and giant otter signs.

Moreover, on two lakes along the Tambopata all giant otter sightings (location, duration, standardized simplified behaviour) were recorded by all guides in two nature tourism operations, as part of a voluntary monitoring of tourism-giant otter interaction. The data, collected over the past two years, shows dramatic changes in terms of the level of tolerance and length of observation of the resident giant otter groups, since the implementation of low impact tourism activities such as hides, fixed boat routes and/or wildlife refuge areas.

These encouraging results, together with our knowledge of the habitat use patterns in the lakes, will provide strong tools towards further improving aquatic habitat use by tourism operators, respecting the spatial requirements of the giant otters while allowing tourists to capture glimpses on undisturbed behaviour.

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## **PERU An evaluation of giant otter conservation status in the Tapiche River, Loreto**

Although populations of giant otters within some protected areas are comparatively well known (Manu, Pacaya Samiria), there is little information on the distribution and

conservation status of the species in other areas of the Peruvian Amazon that present potential as habitat. With this in mind, an evaluation of the conservation status of the giant otter in the Tapiche River, Loreto, was carried out. The survey focused on the Yanayacu Quebrada, due to the relatively low human settlement levels present, as well as unconfirmed reports of the species in the area.

The evaluation involved a 'desk' stage as well as a fieldwork period. In the former, vegetation cover was analysed by means of satellite images and national maps. Using the ERDAS™ programme, a classification utilising a buffer of 1 kilometre around water bodies identified in the field, was developed. A grouping of "Cover Types" is presented such as: rivers and oxbow lakes, riverine forests, swamps and others. The cover that was most abundant proved to be the swamp area.

During the field period, direct and indirect signs of giant otter presence were identified along 33 kilometres of river. There were 12 sightings, 10 of which were of solitary individuals; the remaining 2 were of the same group, known as 'Paddy'. This family of 5 individuals was sighted for the first time during the low water season, and later, in the wet season. The 21 indirect signs (dens, campsites and tracks) were located in the middle reaches of the surveyed area. Finally, actual and/or potential threats to the conservation of the species were identified, such as uncontrolled logging and the presence of domestic animals, amongst others.

The investigation was made possible thanks to the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology (DICE), the World Wildlife Fund – Inc. (WWF – OPP) and the Centro de Datos para la Conservación – Universidad Nacional Agraria La Molina (CDC- UNALM).

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### **BOLIVIA The LONDRA 2001 project receives a BP Follow-Up Award**

In March 2003, the project "An integrated approach towards giant otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) conservation" won a 2003 Follow-Up Award from the consortium formed by BP, Bird Life International and Fauna&Flora International. This award represents the next step in Bolivian giant otter conservation and research, after the successful project "LONDRA 2001", which received the Bronze Award in 2001, and which focused on giant otters in the Noel Kempff Mercado National Park, northeastern Bolivia.

During the LONDRA 2001 project it was recognized that the collection of reliable base-line data, the development of a national conservation strategy, and local awareness-raising are top priorities for the giant otter in Bolivia. Therefore, objectives of the present project are :

- (a) To generate reliable and standardized data on the distribution and population status of the giant otter in the lowlands of Bolivia, through the National Giant Otter Survey (named MALOBO);
- (b) To describe habitat requirements of the giant otter in the lowlands of Bolivia, and to develop preliminary Habitat Suitability and Quality models;
- (c) To study the interaction between giant otters and commercial/subsistence fisheries, particularly in the Noel Kempff Mercado National Park and in the Bolivian Pantanal;
- (d) To set up a national awareness-raising and educational programme focusing on giant otter conservation;

- (e) To set up a fund-raising and support programme to give continuity to giant otter conservation (named LONDRA-WATCH).

This research and conservation project will be developed by a largely Bolivian team of young scientists (organized in COMARH, the “Conservation and Management of Hydrobiological Resources Programme”), receiving support from English and Belgian researchers. The National Giant Otter Survey will be developed in close cooperation with local and international conservation agencies and research centers, such as the Frankfurt Zoological Society, the Wildlife Conservation Society, Hombre y Naturaleza, Center of Limnology and Aquatic Resources, and the University of Sheffield (U.K.). We will keep you informed about progress of the project!

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### **COLOMBIA** Giant otter births in captivity, Cali

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of February, 2003, three cubs were born to a family of five giant otters in the zoo of the city of Cali. This is the third litter to be born in the zoo, and although it is early days as yet, much effort is being put into guaranteeing their survival. The cubs weighed an average of 350 grams at birth; after 22 days this had increased to 700 grams. They spend most of their time feeding and sleeping, with sporadic baths encouraged by their three older siblings. Lluvia and Carolina are the proud parents; they spend most of *their* time keeping an eye on the den, controlling the enthusiasm of Macú, Yucuna and Taraira, and looking after the little ones. All in all, a numerous and wonderful family of giant otters that has already become a symbol of unity and survival for those who have the privilege of knowing them.



The family at rest



The mother and two of her older offspring

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### **ECUADOR** The giant otter, a landscape species

The Ecuador Programme of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) is currently developing the “Living Landscape Programme” in the Yasuni Tropical Forest Conservation Area (central Amazon). The focus of the programme is designed to identify the needs of key animal species, going beyond political and ecological frontiers, in order to develop better ways for people and wildlife to share lands. Thus, the Programme is a tool which attempts to mitigate human impacts and achieve effective conservation in the Yasuni region.

Within this context, the Programme has selected 7 animal species, known as 'Landscape Species', which have large territories and varied habitat requirements, and that are generally prone to local extinction. They are also vulnerable to loss and degradation of habitat, tend to come into conflict with humans, and occur in low densities. These animals play important ecological roles and their disappearance entails the risk of fundamental changes in the structure and function of the ecosystem. As a result, Landscape Species serve as keystone entities for the conservation of a Living Landscape. One of the species selected is the giant otter.

Until now, the Living Landscape Programme of WCS Ecuador has executed three main giant otter studies in the Yasuni region: 1) *Yasuni Aquatic Monitoring – the giant otter, the Amazon dolphin, and other aquatic mammal species in the Yasuni, Tiputini and Tivacuno watersheds*, carried out by Victor Utreras in 2001; 2) *Habitat use, diet, and vital area of the giant otter in the Tambococha and Jatuncocha Rivers*, carried out by Geovanna Lasso in 2001 and 2002, and 3) *Habitat use, vital area and diet of the giant otter in the Añangu watershed*, initiated in 2002 and currently being carried out by Luis Pinos.

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### **BRAZIL A hard life for giant otters in the Brazilian Pantanal**

The Pantanal of Mato Grosso do Sul goes through long and cyclic episodes of flood and drought. Currently, the Pantanal is enduring a new cycle of drought, only previously seen in the 60's, according to the Ecology Program of Gran Pantanal (UFMT-Instituto Max-Planck). The frequent fires which have occurred in the area during the past months may be a consequence of this phenomenon, and affect the fauna of the region. Giant otters also suffer the impact of the drought and the following accounts refer to groups monitored in the regions between the Miranda and Aquidauana rivers, in Mato Grosso do Sul.

The *Couple 20*, being monitored since mid-July 2002, with a territory along the banks of the Aquidauana River, had a litter some time later in the year. On August 24, their den was totally destroyed by the fire which took over the region and practically consumed the whole of Pantanal South. Thanks to their survival instinct and parental care, the couple removed the cubs, established a new den upriver, and was re-sighted a few weeks later.

The couple *Zé do Rancho* and *Mariazinha*, who inhabited the road to the Ingá stream, was not so lucky. Originally identified in the beginning of August 2002, the couple was totally isolated from the main water bodies, rivers and the larger Touro Morto stream. They had two cubs sometime between the last week of August and the second week of September. At the beginning of November, their den, built under the road, collapsed, and the couple with the cubs moved to the other bank of the stream. With the drought intensifying, the family had to move on two further occasions. During one of these moves, at the end of November, the first cub, which was learning to swim and becoming independent, disappeared, possibly victim to a caiman or jaguar. The drought became extreme, and the couple, with the 2<sup>nd</sup> cub, a male, moved to the final portion of the stream, still containing water. The stream finally dried up completely, but the last signs found (fresh faeces) indicated that the animals were still alive. After exhaustive searches in many places around the Ingá stream, the couple was re-sighted at the end of January 2003 in the Touro Morto stream, having travelled by land several kilometres from Ingá, now without the second cub.

**Miriam Marmontel**

### **BRAZIL Pantanal otter project – activities report 2002**

The Pantanal Otter Project is one of the initiatives of the “Projeto Ecolontras” undertaken by the Brazilian NGO “Associação Ecológica Ecomarapendi”. It is now completing one year of research activities involving Neotropical and giant otters. In this first year, the project developed its research at Fazenda Rio Negro, a ranch located in the Pantanal, in Mato Grosso do Sul State. Conservation International acquired this area in 1999 and presently it is a Private Natural Reserve. The Fazenda Rio Negro is included in a core area in the Pantanal-Cerrado Corridor, an initiative of Conservation International to create a protected wildlife corridor linking the Pantanal wetlands with the surrounding Cerrado grassland. As a result of a partnership with Earthwatch Institute, the area was established as an Earthwatch’s Conservation Research Initiative (CRI). Eight research projects are being developed there at the moment - the Pantanal Otter Project is one of them. Earthwatch Institute sponsored this project during the last year with the help of volunteers that provided us with funding and field efforts during the field trips (taking notes, waiting for otters in fixed observation points, washing scats, etc.).

During 2002, the Pantanal Otter Project organised four field trips (March, June, September and November), totalling 48 days of fieldwork. We wished to identify the water bodies that the otters use in the Fazenda Rio Negro, looking for sites that were or were not being used during each field trip; we filmed the giant otters sighted in order to identify the individuals that use the area and to establish an initial database; we started a behavioural study of the species in Brazilian Pantanal; and we collected and began the analysis of the scats of giant and neotropical otters, with the purpose of determining whether there is diet overlap.

The data collected thus far is not conclusive, but it is a first step towards understanding the biology and ecology of giant otters in the Brazilian Pantanal. Using the experience of this year we are directing efforts to increase the activities of the project, both in the Fazenda Rio Negro and in other Pantanal areas. During 2003, we will have six field trips with Earthwatch volunteers in order to collect more data. We are planning (and looking for funds) to install a researcher at Fazenda Rio Negro to collect more continuous information about the giant and neotropical otters there and to start monitoring otters in other Private Natural Reserves of the Brazilian Pantanal region.

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## **SPECIALS**

### **The cubs of Najal, Reserva Xixuau, Roraima, Brazil**

Najal is the name of a lake close to our base camp. In December, at the height of the low water season, it remains cut off from the river and can only be reached overland, an hour’s walk. On the morning of December 8, 2002, we arrive at Najal Lake at 9.00am. At that time of day we expected to come across a group of giant otters that we know, fishing around their den, but today we are unlucky. The territory of this group extends to the South and over the past two years we have often seen them swimming in the Lago da Cerca and the Lago da Queimada, so we head off in that direction. But there is no sign of them in either of these lakes, no dens being used, no tracks and no distant calls.

**14.00 Hours.** On the way back we stop at the den which has been most in use recently. It is on the other side of the lake, about 80 meters distant from us. There is no wind and that makes it possible to hear even far away noises; a subdued crying attracts our attention. It is a monotonous lament and we immediately recognize the typical scream of a giant otter cub. This is confirmed through the binoculars. At the entrance of the den a cub is standing about midway between the entrance to the den and the water line. Its eyes appear to be shut and it is about 30 cm long. It is crying and from time to time it tries to get back into the den but the climb up is long and slow. Its uncertain steps are punctuated by long periods of stillness. More than once it falls back down the slope. At times the crying becomes more acute and the cub violently swings the back end of its body, its tail straight out and rigid. Over a period of several hours we see it reach the mouth of the den three times without entering, and once it goes in but then emerges again almost at once.

**16.30 Hours.** It falls and rolls down along to the water edge. It remains still for several minutes and then it appears to want to go into the water. Very slowly and screaming all the time it moves down to the water and enters. It doesn't fall into the water, it dives in and to our great surprise it starts to swim with rapid and uncoordinated movements. It puts its head under and its back emerges from the water without the typical curve of the adults; the tail waves about in the air. It covers 6-8 meters until it reaches a fallen tree that it can use to rest against. It goes back, often stopping along the bank where the water is shallower, and then it returns to the fallen tree, all the while crying desperately.

**16.35 Hours.** At the mouth of the den another cub appears. It is the same size as the first one, makes the same ungraceful movements and it also screams loudly. The second cub emerges from the den and stays by the entrance for a few minutes, it climbs down but then changes its mind and struggles back up to the entrance to the den and goes inside. It appears again but only for short periods and without coming out. The cub in the waters remains silent on the bank or the branches of the fallen tree. From time to time it cries out and swims around, but without returning to the den.

**17.30 Hours.** A black caiman is immobile on the surface in the middle of the lake, midway between the cub and me. It seems to be observing the scene and that unsettles me although I know there is a large presence of *Melanosuchus niger* and *Caiman crocodilus* in the lake.

**19.00 Hours.** At sunset the adults have still not returned. We can see the white sand of the den from our hiding place, and we can still hear the cries of the cub in the water.

**20.00 Hours.** The darkness has hidden everything. The cub is silent.

It is time for doubts and decisions: what should we do? We have overcome the surprise of discovering that the Najal group has had two cubs, and now fear seeing them die. Why hasn't the group returned? And what should we do? Intervene or let Nature take its course? Go around the edge of the lake to the other side, and to do what? I am still expecting the group to return at any moment. If they don't, what are the chances of the two cubs surviving in our hands? From experience we know they are very slim. We could pick up the cub and return it to the den, but how would the group behave after we have intervened? Alexandre agrees with me, we won't return to the base camp. We make a camp for the night but decide not to interfere.

The next morning, at dawn, the den appears as we left it, no new prints: the group has not come back.

**06.10 Hours.** A cry comes from inside the den; a single cub appears at the entrance. It emerges, rolls down the bank, stops and then tries to climb back up. It repeats the same movements we saw yesterday.

**08.00 Hours.** Time passes and its hunger increases. It is crying desperately, when we hear sounds coming from the South. It is a group of giant otters fishing: at last. The cub seems to calm down; its cries become less constant.

**08.15 Hours.** In a clumsy movement it rolls into the water, gives out a squeak and then continues to cry out, standing completely still in the shallow water.

**08.30 Hours.** An adult arrives from the South. It approaches the cub in the water and takes it in its jaws. It immediately heads off in the same direction, without looking any further; it is impossible to say who the individual is. We wait for it to come back and look for the other cub.

**10.30 Hours.** An adult approaches from the South again. It swims around the entrance to the den before entering it. It comes back out and looks around. It is Negro, one of the adults from the Najal group. It goes back in, digs around the entrance with its front paws, comes back out and heads off to the South. It was probably looking for the second cub and didn't find it.

The group returned to the lake again in the afternoon but never approached the den. We saw them fishing close by. We reached the other side at 2pm, looking for something to help us understand the situation. But all we found were tiny tracks along the lake edge.

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## REGULARS

### The Latest Publications

*Landscape Ecology and Resource Management – Linking Theory with Practice*, (2003) edited by John Bissonette and Ilse Storch and published by Island Press, is designed to bridge the gap between current scientific understanding of the discipline of landscape ecology, and its application. Five case studies are offered, one of which is entitled “Giant Otters in the Peruvian Rainforest: Linking Protected Area Conditions to Species Needs” (Schenck *et al.*). The article analyses the viability of the giant otter population of the Manu Biosphere Reserve and discusses the consequences for managing this huge protected area.

### Forthcoming Events

#### *Giant otter survey methodology standardization and habitat management course*

The Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project (FZSGOP) is organizing a second, 12-day Giant Otter Survey Methodology and Habitat Management Standardisation field course/workshop. The course will take place between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of June, 2003, in the

Bahuaja Sonene National Park and Tambopata Reserved Zone, Madre de Dios, south-eastern Peru.

No fewer than 10 giant otter specialists from Venezuela, Suriname, Guyana, Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru will unite to share experiences, and to begin to ensure that the same methodology is used in different countries, producing usefully comparable survey and monitoring results according to different habitats. A document entitled “Giant otter distribution surveys, population censuses and monitoring – Towards a Standard Method” (Groenendijk et al.) is currently being drafted with contributions from all those who participated in the first workshop (held in November 2002 in Peru) and has been sent to participants of the planned workshop for comments.

Subjects covered during the workshop will be how to:

- \* recognize and age indirect signs of giant otter presence such as dens, campsites and tracks,
- \* differentiate them from the dens, spraints and tracks of the Neotropical otter (*Lontra longicaudis*),
- \* use data check sheets and GPS for survey and management purposes,
- \* maximise chances of sighting giant otters and how to film giant otter throat markings,
- \* manage tourism so that it is a force for conservation rather than a threat to the species,
- \* manage giant otter habitat within the context of protected area management.

## Pepe’s Paragraph

I’ve had some bad news recently, so I’m afraid you find me in a somewhat sombre mood. You see, last year there were three cases of somebody capturing a cub from giant otter families in southeastern Peru. One of those families are close friends of mine. I’m sure that this does not just happen in my country. We all know that we were hunted for our pelts for decades, but thankfully that ended in the mid 1970s. I thought that we were safe now, but it seems that some people find our little ones irresistible. So do we, though. Please, can you help me raise awareness of our protected status, that taking a cub can cause dreadful consequences such as the breaking up of an entire family, and that one day those cubs grow up and need lots of fish and may get a bit wild, perhaps doing harm to their ‘owners’? Our cubs belong with us, in our watery world. Thanks a lot in advance, your sad friend,



Pepe

## Notice Board

! Juan Carlos has kindly sent two wonderful photographs for inclusion in this newsletter. I hope these will be the first of many!! Please feel free to send pictures at any time.

Comments and written contributions are gratefully received. Please send them to: **The Editor, Friends of the Giant Otter, Calle 5, No. 131, Dpto. 202, Urb. Los Jasmínes, Santiago de Surco, Lima** or to [fzsgop@terra.com.pe](mailto:fzsgop@terra.com.pe). If you wish your name to be removed from the mailing list, or if your address changes, please notify the Editor. The opinions expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily shared by the Frankfurt Zoological Society Giant Otter Project ([www.giantotters.com](http://www.giantotters.com)).

